

Q: Additional to the biographical information that I just asked you, what type of work did you do before and after coming to Aspira?

A: Well before I was at Aspira I was doing some security work, but before that, I was already working at Aspira. I was working with the Americore programs, a national service program. I worked with students at Jersey City Dickinson high school. There I had to implement and put together violence prevention programs for the students with conflict resolution involved. We sat with the students kind of the way we do things here and we help them. We have them talking in certain groups, and I guess they liked what I was doing. After I did my little bit of security I came back here just to say hello and I was offered a job. That's what happened.

Q: What is Aspira?

A: That word aspira is a Spanish adverb, which means to aspire. That's why we took on that name for the agency. And Aspira has been around for many years. We have several Aspiras in the nation, its a national organization we have Aspira in of course New Jersey, New York, where we started in 1960, in new jersey we started in 1968. We also have it in Connecticut, we have it in Illinois, Chicago, and we have it also in Florida, Puerto Rico and Philadelphia, and we have our national office in Washington D.C. I was involved in Aspira when I was a child which is why I know about Aspira I was an "aspirante", that's what we call our students, aspirantes.

Q: What is the objective of the organization?

A: Well our motto is leadership through education. So basically what we want to do is to

keep students in school. We want to focus on teaching them about their history and culture because they need to know where they came from in order to know where they're going (you've heard that before) so we try to instill in them this value of education. We want to have them continue to stay in school, learn as much as they can and not let the stereotypes get to them about whether or not they can succeed because they are Latino. This is a Latino organization but we don't exclude any students we work with all students. It's pretty much a multi-culture club that we have with the students. We offer them conferences, we actually went to one on Saturday it was a Latino and African American empowerment conference. The student who did attend enjoyed it. We also provide workshops for them on any number of topics from HIV, to teen pregnancy, gang violence, drug abuse, abuse in the home, career fairs, and personal which I do a lot of that because a lot of them just want to talk. Sometimes they don't have anyone to talk to and they'll say hey Miss. Valentine let me tell you what happen the other day, my brother, my sister, or my moms bothering me or (they discuss their grades) their grades. So we do all of those things with them. I work with the middle school students. I work with two schools in Newark one is Louis Munoz Marin Middle School which was an old Broadway Junior High, that's where I started with Aspira and Dr. Horton Middle School. There I have different sets of students, a lot the problems are the same but I find different personalities in each of the schools.

Q: So when you were in middle school and you decided to come here for yourself, what was the reason behind that?

A: Well it seemed like a fun club I was one of the young students. I always seemed to be

one of the youngsters in all of our activities. I saw some kids and they kind of invited us cause a lot of the times what I have the students do is we try to recruit their friends to come to the club because some of them are not interested in joining. They think what kind of club is this, a leadership club, they don't understand what that means and that sounds boring it doesn't sound like it's any fun but I try to mix some fun with the learning. So they're learning while they're having fun because no student wants to go to another class after school. So I try to incorporate some activities. It might appear like their playing but in fact they're learning something. They might be sitting on the floor or standing in a circle instead of just sitting down with papers. I try not to give them too much paper work. Here and there I'll give them something like a quiz to get their memories going about why they are here in the first place. Why they are there to learn about leadership, how they should try to learn as much as possible so they can become leaders because they feel that they can't. That that's for someone else to do. But I notice a lot of the girls are more involved than the boys are, so I'm trying to get the boys more involved. They need to see their leadership also.

Q: Do you only help Latinos or do you help students from other ethnic backgrounds as well?

A: No. We help all students, I have a nice mix of African American students in my club, and there are also Caucasian students, some Asian students and some kids make that mistake that that you have to be Puerto Rican to be in the club and that's not the case at all. Or they say, at least you have to speak Spanish. No they don't have to; everything that we do at the club is in English. We throw in some Spanish words here and there but

it's English based. We like to put all the historical cultural information into what we do. We want the kids to understand what they are about and what others are about so we incorporate that.

Q: Who was the founder?

A: Yes, the founder of this organization is Antonia Pantoja and she's still alive. I believe she resides in New York or Puerto Rico or maybe both.

Q: What is your typical workday?

A: Everyday it is a little different here at Aspira. For example Mondays and Fridays I'm in the office, there's always a lot of paper work. We always have reports to do. That seems like a never-ending task. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays I'm at the schools, both schools. I have to split up my time between both of the schools. For example, on a Tuesday I should be visiting both schools. I'll visit the first one and I'll spend some time in the cafeteria because the teachers and the principals really don't like for you to go into the classroom. Not at the school that I'm at. They don't like you to go in the classrooms and interrupt the teachers. So I see them in the hallways if they're walking around. I'm there to monitor certain things. I'll see them in the cafeteria, I'll talk to them and do some counseling. Or (she'll see them) in the playground. Also I see them on Wednesdays. For example, on Wednesday I have club meetings with Dr. Horton and Thursdays I have a club meeting with Luis Munoz Marin after school. We have one club meeting a week and they last for about an hour after school from 3pm - 4pm. We discuss topics that need to be brought up. If we want to have a fundraiser, we'll discuss that so

we can raise a little money, perhaps go on a fun trip. Most of the trips are education based. We might go to the museum, to a conference, to a college trip, but sometimes they want to go on a fun trip and they deserve that. They want to raise money perhaps to buy T-shirts (etc.). It's up to them. We'll have a speaker come in and, like I said, we have a different topic that can be talked about to get their minds going so they can be aware of what's out there. So that's what we do during club time.

Q: Do meetings usually takes place at this location or do you always go to their schools for meeting?

A: Well when I'm counseling them, and when I'm there to see them, I'll go to the school. But a lot of the times we have activities here. They can come here whenever they feel like it. If they want to come to the office after school they're free to do so. Allot of them don't do it because they have other obligations once they leave the school or they're just not allowed to come this far from their school. I mean it's not that far but sometimes parents think so for their safety. They don't want them coming here at certain times without permission because then they don't know where their children are. Especially the middle school (students) and those are the two groups that I work with. We usually have high school students come here and if they need to use the computers to look up some information on the Internet, something having to do with education, because we don't like them playing around on the computers. They can come here and talk to us or come here and do their homework, perhaps if it's too hectic at home. A lot of times we have a spring dance for them, some entertain for them. We'll have it downstairs. We have a crystal ballroom in the basement and it's pretty nice. Sometimes we have awards night

so they can enjoy themselves.

Q: Do you offer counseling to even younger children for example elementary school students?

A: If people came here on individual bases sure we'd help them. But sometimes people come off the streets and they want a referral for a GED program, which we do not offer. We also don't offer ESL programs. A lot of people have that misconception and they'll call up. They want to know when we're going to have our next class. And we have to tell them; well we don't offer those things. Or they'll call and ask "can you pay for my schooling?" But we don't do that either. We can refer them to scholarship sources and occasionally we'll have some of the bigger companies perhaps Pepsi or Coca Cola, one of those types of companies give us some money so we can make a small contribution or small scholarship for our graduation seniors. We just don't have people come in off the street, but we will help them if they want to come in to have some counseling or find a program we can try to direct them in that way. We work with middle school 6th, 7th and 8th graders and also high school students and our agency (in our new location) we work with 3 middle schools right now Raphael Hernandez, Dr. Horton Luis Munoz also Barenger High School and East Side High School. In New Jersey we are the most spread out of all the Aspira agencies in the nation. We have aspira in Passaic, in Paterson, Jersey City, of course Newark, Trenton, Perth Amboy, New Brunswick, Camden, Atlantic City and Violin. So were opening up a lot more agencies throughout New Jersey to be able to cover the population.

Q: When students go off to college are they still considered to be a part of Aspira?

A: Yes, another saying we have here is “once an aspirante, always an aspirante”. So if they ever need help they can come back. But that’s something they have to do because after they have left high school we usually will not keep up with them unless they’re involved in an alumni association. I don’t have a lot of information about that association but a lot of times students come back. We have certain people whom after they graduated from college or while their even in college they’ll come back here perhaps looking for employment or internship but a lot of people keep in touch.

Q: What type of special skills did you need to obtain this job?

A: Special skills wow, let’s see. I guess I had to be a people person. You have to be patient to work with inner city school students or just to work with students in general inner city or not. Also to be able to work with a schedule that fluctuates. I'll get a memo tomorrow saying we'll have to go to training, or we're going to do a new project, or recruit students, we're having a field trip, you have to work this Saturday. It could be one thing or another so you have to be pretty flexible, you have to be willing to negotiate, cooperate and really enjoy working with people. There are people here with different types of degrees that never thought they would be working here. But they come and they work and it appears that they enjoy it. I notice that they do enjoy working with the students. Especially when you see some improvement in their lives and how they are benefiting.

Q: Do you like your job?

A: I do generally. I really do enjoy working with the students, I could put off the paper work, but I enjoy working with the students.

Q: Do you consider yourself an active role model in the development and advancement of Latino youth? How so?

A: I would think so but I guess you would have to ask them. I try to be involved in their lives. Sometimes I'll call them at home or sometimes they'll call me at home. It usually is not the case but if they have some extenuating circumstance, or if they need someone to talk to they know they can reach me if there is some type of emergency.

Q: What goals did you want to accomplish at Aspira:

A: What I wanted to accomplish was, what our goal is, to keep the students in school so they can make the best out of their lives whatever that may be for them. Each one of them has their own individual goals and whatever success is for them. That's what I want them to do. I want them to know they have options, not to think that they can only be a mechanic, or they can only go to beauty school, they can't aspire, or they can't be a doctor, they can't be a lawyer. I want them to know they can be whatever it is that they want as long as they're focused. I like to do a lot of team building activities with them because a lot of them haven't been out of Newark or the city that they have been raised in. So I do the team building so they can learn how to work with one another and when they have to work with other people they'll know how to do that a little better. They are going to come into contact with people that are not like them so I tell them you don't have to like them you just have to know how to work with them.



Q: Since you have been working for Aspira, what changes have you seen?

A: I've seen changes in the staff or activities that we do with the students. Sometimes we have more activities sometimes we have less, different conferences we might attend. Some things are the same some things are different because we're growing more now that we have so many centers. We have nine centers when only a couple of years ago we had Newark, Jersey City, Trenton and Camden and now we have so many more. Sometimes we'll do activities for the northern centers or the central centers because it could be difficult to get people from Violin to do activities with the kids from Newark. Every year we do manage to get all the students together to do an activity.

Q: What changes have you seen in the aspirantes and the advancement of their communities?

A: A lot of them get involved. Some of them start out really shy and you'll hear them say well "I don't know how to do that", or "I don't want to meet new kids because their going to make fun of me". And I say well how do you know unless you go out there. After a while you see them change a bit, wanting to open up more or they'll try to bring new kids into the club once they know that their going to have a good time. They're going to learn but they're going to have a good time. Every year we have a leadership retreat and we take them for a weekend to Blairstown, New Jersey and they stay in cabins. They do a lot of outdoor activities, a lot of team building, and they get to meet a lot of students because we take all of our students from all of our centers and they meet together. Its very culturally based, they do a lot of awareness. We have what's called a

triple “A” process at Aspira. We have analysis, awareness and action. They have to analyze what's going on in their surroundings, they have to be aware of what to do, and once they are aware of the changes they want to see they have to act on it and that's the part that's hardest to get to. Where they have the courage enough to try to make some changes.

Q: What does it mean to both you and to Aspira when you fail to accomplish these goals?

A: Well everybody fails. I always see it like this, imagine if you were to fall outside, do you just stay there? And figure “well I might as well not get up because I just fell“. You know you have to get up. Everybody fails and who ever hasn't failed is perfect and we don't have any people like that. That's what you learn from experience. Experience is a very good teacher. We try to get our student to say “well if you fail try again, get back up, try and start over“. We have to keep changing or else we're going to always fail. It's not a good feeling to fail of course but you have to learn from it and move on.

Q: What does it take to inspire individuals who have no motivation to better themselves?

A: Sometimes they just need a lot of encouragement. Some kids have no motivation and a lot of it stems from what's going on at home. Because that's where you learn everything. Your language, your eating habits, your bathing habits. A lot of what they learn is at home, whether it's good or bad. So a lot of the times you just have to be there for them. You have to say “come on I'm there for you, I'm waiting for you, and I'm going to be behind you all the way.” “If you're going to mess something up then let's try

over.” A lot of the times you have to give them your own experiences so that they don’t look at you and say “Oh you never been through this you don’t know what I’m talking about.” I say sure I do, I was born and raised here just like you. I went to the same public schools. I grew up with one pair of sneakers and wore them until they had holes in them. You know things like that. You have to really open up to them sometimes. Sometimes they see us as their friend more than just their counselor because we’re very family oriented here at Aspira. They’ll see us and say they can really talk to this person, she’s really cool and really down to earth. That’s something we are here for. We are trying to be down to earth and we want them to know that we’ve been through some of the same things, or maybe worse, but we’re making it because we continue to try. Some kids are a lot harder to get through, some of them we don’t get through, but we try to. As long as we get to a couple of them we’re happy.

Q: Do you have any people working for Aspira that are not of Latin decent?

A: At this time, No.

Q: Why is that?

A: We have before. We have had some African Americans who work with our agency. I believe we’ve had a number of Caucasian. Maybe Asians, I’m not quite positive. But mostly because this is a Latino organization we have people whom speak Spanish because it’s helpful. We target Latino children so a lot of them (counselors) are Spanish speaking and they want to see those same faces. We’ve had other people who are not of Hispanic origin working here.

Q: So when it comes down to being able to identify with the students (the way you said you have) do you think people of non-Hispanic decent can do that?

A: Definitely. They'll tell me "oh you've done that too, get out of here." "You listen to this music too". And I have to tell them yes. Few are surprised that I live in Newark. I'll run into them at Path Mark and they think "oh she's like us, and she eats the same kind of food. And they like that.

Q: How do students react when they first join the organization?

A: Some of them don't know what it's about so you have to explain it to them. They think well what's Aspira or they pronounce it wrong and say aspirin. So I always explain to them what it is. And we have our little symbol, it's a bird and we call it a Pitirre. That bird is used as a symbol for them because its a small bird, its found in Puerto Rico and it defeats and outsmarts larger birds. Its used to say you can accomplish your goals no matter what's in you way and no matter what obstacles are there as long as you keep focus. It's a very focused bird it's called a Pitirre and that's what we use. You might see it on our letterhead. It's an abstract looking bird. The students want to know what we do here and we tell them well we learn a lot of things. They're not sure what our objectives is that day, but they know that they've learned something at the end the meeting. They say well "I remember what you said to me about airline pilots, or nurses, and what they actually have to do". A lot of the times we'll go into careers with them. We tell them this is what people actually do, its not glamorous. They want to be lawyers but do you know lawyers read a lot. That's mostly what they do. They're not trying to look cute or

cool like you see them on TV. A lot of behind the scenes is what their work is. You don't want them not to be lawyers or doctors, but you want to be realistic with them. This is what they have to go through they have to make lots of sacrifices to do certain things. But we encourage them along the way.

Q: Statistically, how many lives have the organization touched?

A: I would say at least 40,000. In the agency we've served so many students but I don't have those numbers with me. 40% of them are non-Latino students.

Q: What other types of jobs do people at Aspira perform?

A: Most of us are counselors. We also have a coordinator, which helps coordinate (of course) programs and find activities for the children to participate in. Also we have a bookkeeper, a secretary, we have our executive director. We have a CTC guy-a computer guy. He helps us with all our technology, which we are getting into a whole lot more. Now we have a web site, its Aspira.org and it's been new for the last couple of years. We want to be progressive in what we're doing.

Q: What types of programs does Aspira offer?

A: We have a number of programs. I can mention a couple off my head otherwise I would have to get a list for you. We had a health careers programs but, we no longer have that one we also have a talent search program, the leadership program is the main program that we have. And a lot of the programs are kind of run the same way. We have a math and science program as well. We have an APEX program and it stands for Aspira

Parents for Educational Excellence. Lots of the parents attend workshops, which help them to learn how to deal with the school system, and know their rights because a lot of parents don't know what their rights are. They know that their kids get a report card, they sign it and they send it back. But they need to know how to deal with the administration in the school and what their right as parents are. Can they go to the office when they need to? Can they go see their children? A lot of them don't know that they think that's none of their business. And it really is their business. I know I was raised with my mom. She told me to do my homework and she sent me off to school. That was it. She wasn't involved. We want all parents involved in our student's education because like I said it's in the home where everything starts. Some of the workshops include topics like self-esteem. A lot of the parents don't have self-esteem. They can't help their children have self-esteem if they don't have it. Perhaps we'll get some of the parents who haven't finished their high school education to go on and get their GED or high school Diploma and maybe go to some training programs. So the APEX program is a very good program for the parents.

Q: Why did you stop the health careers program?

A: I think it had to do with funding. But that's all I know about that. I've always been involved with the leadership program.

Q: Well can you explain the leadership program?

A: The leadership program is the main program we have at Aspira. There is where we try to teach our students to become leaders by offering them different avenues they can

go through. We have the after school program and it's not everyday, it's only once a week we meet with the students. They come after school we'll do some activity. For example, a workshop, a presentation, a career workshop. Recently we had a series of workshops on Aids education and Aids prevention. They enjoyed that. They were able to play a couple of games at the same time they were learning how to avoid the means by which people get Aids. Like drug abuse, unprotected sex, so we stress abstinence. It's never too early for them to know about it. We recently went on a trip to a conference and it was very educational. We had a very good keynote speaker from one of the colleges. I thought that it was a very motivating talk that he did for students, so they know then can go out there and if they want to become college professors they can be, so they can see people like them be in the universities. We help them to see that they can get involved with their communities. We keep them in school, they can't be a part of our program - and a lot of them like to be - unless they're in school. You have to improve your grades; you have to get everything together so they can participate in our program.

Q: So what happens when you see someone not in school?

A: We call them so see what's going on with them. Right now out of both schools I'm required to work with 85 students from each school. But for the club only about 20 or so show up. Some students are not allowed to come to the club meetings because they may have some other obligations at home or they might be involved in sports. I'm always competing with the sports teams or other clubs because they find the sports more fun than being at Aspira. That's why I try to keep it interesting and fresh and lively. Sometimes I'll give them prizes if they answer certain things right. I just gave them a Boriqua quiz

yesterday in asking them what they knew about Latinos in Puerto Rico and other parts (of the countries) just to see what they know. Because they don't know about Latinos in history. They know of George Washington and Lincoln, they may know a few African American scientist and poets but they don't really know much about Latinos. So we need to bring that to them as well.

Q: How do you select the students in the leadership program?

A: I work with six, seventh and eighth graders and when I see them in the cafeteria or in the classroom I make a presentation. But I mostly see them in the cafeteria or in the playground and I just go up to them. I say "hi my name is Miss. Valentin and I'm offering this program and I want you to get involved". And I have a very comical sense of humor with them. I'm always talking with them or fooling around with them and telling them jokes. I try to get them involved. I tell them we're going to have some fun, come by, learn something new, you're going to learn how to become leaders. Teach them about their history and they can learn some things about careers.

Q: How often do you do this recruiting?

A: I'm still in the recruitment process I'm still trying to get students.

SIDE B

Q: If someone like me wanted to become a member of Aspira how would you explain the process?

A: Because you're in college you can not. If we were to have some program or some



activity that you want to get involved with you can always contact my supervisor and see how you could possibly become involved but because your not one of the students in the school we work in, its kind of difficult to have you as part of our program.

Q: What social activities does Aspira provide?

A: Occasionally we'll have some dances or we call them socials. We might take them canoeing or white water rafting. Something fun or educational where they can work together. I've taken students sailing. We go to the museum, perhaps to the aquarium. We might have an awards night, special students day, or a luncheon.

Q: Do you reward students when they complete assignments or reach short-term goals?

A: Yes we can. And each counselor can do his or her own thing. Perhaps give them some type of prize. Sometimes we give them free tickets to maybe a game. We also might attend some type of play or musical at the New Jersey Pac. It hasn't been done in a while but sometimes we get free bees. At the end of the year we have an awards night and certain students are nominated aspirante of the year - those are for the high school students. For the middle school students we have Pitirre of the year - the bird I was telling you about earlier. Also they might have a couple of scholarships here and there for them. About 4 years ago I was working with two students. I sent them away for a month to South Dakota. They were staying at a reservation. They went all over the place and they had a really good time. One of the boys was involved in trying to hunt down a buffalo. They went to Mount Rushmore and had a really good time. They grew up over that summer over there.

Q: Why make this a non-profit organization?

A: I don't know why. I can't answer that.

Q: How do you finance the organization?

A: There are some private donations, also some government donation as well. Some institutions and major companies have contributed to Aspira also.

Q: For example, who are some of the funders?

A: I believe AT&T is one of the funding companies. I know that United Way is also one of the financial institutions that contribute.

Q: Do you personally earn a salary working in this organization, or are you a volunteer?

A: Yes we do. I earn a salary.

Q: How has working at Aspira affected your life?

A: It's affected my life in a sense that I know that I have touched some of the lives of the students I've worked with. Hopefully all of them. Hopefully they'll remember me and perhaps I have said or done something that motivated them to go on or to look at another day. Instead of perhaps talking about ending their life. We have students that come depressed. Hopefully I have said something to change their mind. They'll say "you know it's not as bad as I think". I'll always give them this little phrase and I say "well how bad is it?" "Well really is it a global catastrophe beyond proportion?" And then

they'll think well I guess not. So I try to get them to see things in a different perspective or to be in someone else shoes. Some of their lives are not that great but I always compare it to the lives of someone else in a third world country and they think well "oh it's not that bad. They say "well, at least I eat everyday". I try to get them to see things can be better. It's hard for some kids to put the effort but I encourage them.

Q: If you could change anything that you or this organization has done what would it be?

A: Wow, I've never had that question asked of me. I wish we had more money so that we could offer the students more opportunities to do more things. Maybe if it was for profit. I'm not sure if that's the right answer or the right thing that I would hope for. I wish we could do more things with them or take them to more places. Because of the funding (money is limited) I can only recruit a certain amount of students because of the money factor. I would definitely cut out the paper work. But that's necessary because we have to report everything.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT COUNSELOR